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THREE THEORISTS OF THE THEATRE

PART I

By PROFESSOR BRANDER MATTHEWS

CRITICS of the drama are like the poor, in that they are always with us. It matters little whether the theater is flourishing or expiring; we are never at a loss for self-appointed judges, ready to pass condemnation on the principles and on the practices of the playwrights. In Alexandria of Egypt when dramatic literature was almost non-existent, as the glory that was Greece was slowly sinking out of sight, and in Italy, when there was a splendid renaissance of all the arts save the drama alone, there existed a superabundant and superfluous host of critics promulgating the rigid code which they had deduced from their own inner consciousness.

Indeed, it seems to be especially in times of dramatic penury that the theorists of the theater increase and multiply spontaneously. And this is most unfortunate, since it is quite as bad for a critic as it is for a poet to let himself lose sight of the actual playhouse, with its associated players and its accustomed playgoers. The fundamental principles of any art can be singled out and made plain only by observation of the practice of the artists who have excelled in that art. Criticism is but the hand-maid of creation; and the task of the commentator is impossible when he lacks material for comment. Then is he reduced to the needless and profitless exercise of inventing rules for an art which he has not been able to observe in the actual process. Whenever the dramatic critic has toiled vainly, because there was no living drama in his own tongue and in his own time to inspire him and to guide him, he has been led unfaithfully to deal with the drama as though it were solely a department of literature, to be weighed on literary scales only, and to be measured merely by literary standards.

Even when the theater is active and productive it is difficult enough for the critic to remember always that the drama does not lie wholly within the limits of literature. No doubt, it is mainly by its literary qualities that a drama survives, by its invention, by its structure, by its style, by its veracity of character, by its ethical integrity. But it is by its non-literary qualities that it has been able at first to succeed on the stage, by its theatrical effectiveness, its histrionic opportunities, its picturesqueness when performed. As Brunetière put it with his customary clearness, "a play does not begin to exist as a play except before the footlights, by virtue of the collaboration and of the complicity of the public, without which a play never has been and never can be anything more than a mere literary exercise." It is in the theater and before the many-

headed crowd that a play, however poetic, must establish itself first of all, or it will never have chance afterward to impose itself on the solitary student in the library.

In the long, interesting and instructive history of dramatic criticism—a history which has not yet tempted to its telling any scholar equipped with a wide acquaintance with literature and a deep understanding of the theater—in this long history two names stand out preëminent, the names of Aristotle and of Lessing. The names of the Alexandrian writers are forgotten; and the names of the critics of the Italian Renaissance are familiar only to devoted specialists. It may be admitted that the names of Sidney and of Boileau are still cherished; but the code they declared has long been discredited and disestablished. The names of Gottsched and of La Harpe carry no weight in the twentieth century, even to those who chance to remember that once they were severally acclaimed as arbiters of taste. Many a name that for a season blazed brilliantly in the sky is as disregarded today as the stick of a burnt-out rocket. Who pays any attention today to Schlegel, sunk beneath the wave of oblivion because of the rancor of his political prejudices and because of the frequent falsity of his general ideas? Who knows now, or cares to know, that a century ago Nepomucène Lemer cier catalogued the twenty-five rules which tragedy must obey and the twenty-two rules to which comedy must conform?

Critics of the drama come and go; they rise and fall; they have their little fame, and sometimes they may survive to see it fade away. Reputation is as fleeting in criticism as it is in creation; and the promulgators of dramatic doctrine are no more likely to retain popular esteem than the poets and the playwrights they have sought to guide and to govern. The winds of doctrine shift with the changing years, and often with startling suddenness. But however bitterly the veering breezes may blow, the names of Aristotle and of Lessing stand where they have stood these many years.

It is a futile pleasure that we find in the selection of the Hundred Best Books or of the Hundred Finest Pictures; but there is always profit in striving to recognize with certainty the Best Poets and the Best Painters, be they a dozen or a score or a hundred. And when we seek to get a firm grasp upon the abiding principles of any art, it is no less profitable for us to ascertain who are the Best Critics of that art. In the analysis and interpretation of the art of the drama the supreme chiefs are Aristotle and Lessing, these two and no others. They are theorists, it is true, like the Alexandrians

and the Italians whose vogue was evanescent; but their theories were solidly rooted in accurate observation of the acted drama. The laws they declared are as valid today as ever; their judgments have been confirmed in the supreme court over which Time presides; and even their *obiter dicta* are still significant.

When we seek to spy out the reasons why the solid authority of Aristotle and Lessing endures through the ages, we must begin by crediting both of them with the fourfold qualifications without which all efforts at criticism are barren. They had insight and equipment, sympathy and disinterestedness. They did not possess all of these qualifications in an equal degree; but all four of these they did possess not only sufficiently but abundantly. They had the innate gift of analysis; they had material for comparison; they had a natural relish for the best; and they sought always to see the thing as it is without bias, taking their personal prejudices out of the way. Whatever deduction may be indicated from this assertion must be directed to two points only: Aristotle may be held to be a little limited in his equipment by the fact that he had no other dramatic literature to compare with that of his countrymen; and Lessing may be thought to be a little limited in his disinterestedness by his desire to discredit and to destroy the influence of the French Classicists.

Then the ultimate validity of their criticism is due partly to the fact that their vision was not circumscribed by the walls of the playhouse; they toiled in other fields and they knew many things wholly unrelated to the theater. Their reputations do not rest solely or even chiefly on their work as expounders of dramaturgic doctrine. One might go so far as to say that although Aristotle and Lessing are the supreme dramatic critics, their fame would scarcely be less if they had never written a word about the theater. No man can know his own subject thoroughly if his own subject is all that he knows: he needs to wander afield and to be interested in many other things, if he is to attain breadth of vision even in his own specialty. Aristotle and Lessing also had that cognate culture, without which, as Mr. Brownell insists, "specific erudition produces a rather lean result."

But although their vision was not contracted within the limits of the theater, it is always in the theater itself that they conceive themselves to be sitting when they come to the criticism of a play. They are never mere readers of literature but always spectators of the acted drama. They are ever thinking in terms of the theater itself. "A play has this peculiarity and distinction" said Brunetière "that being written to be acted, it is not complete in itself and it cannot be detached from the material conditions of scenic representation and from the nature of the public for which it is destined." Aristotle and Lessing kept in mind the nature of the public to which the playwrights they were discussing had appealed; and they never overlook the material conditions of scenic representation. By a constant effort of imaginative sympathy they were able to transport themselves in fancy from the desk where they sat alone to a seat in front of the actors and by the side of a crowd of other spectators. Fortunately for them, the absurdity of a closet-drama had not been suggested in their day, and therefore they had no occasion to assert that a

play which is not vital in the theater is of necessity lifeless in the library. It is by their understanding of this Siamese-twinship of the drama and the theater that their theories are validated.

The principles they establish for dramatic literature were derived from the practise of successful playwrights. These principles had nothing ethereal or volatile; they were rooted in common-sense. What Professor Giddings says about Aristotle as an interpreter of the science of government is equally true about Aristotle as an expounder of the art of poetry: "Aristotle was indeed one of the greatest of the theorists; but he is likewise one of the shrewdest judges of what we call practical politics"; and "his theories grew out of his observations, and they formulate vital principles from concrete social conditions." And Lessing was scarcely less shrewd than Aristotle as a judge of practical playmaking, having even the advantage of being himself a successful playwright, practising what he preached.

In other words, the dramatic criticism of Aristotle and Lessing is expert criticism; and it is highly technical. As the technical principles of every art endure through the ages unchanged, however much its devices may be modified by altered conditions, the precepts proposed by Aristotle and by Lessing are the permanent and essential principles of dramaturgy. Indeed, it is the insistence of Aristotle upon sheer technic which has misled so many of his commentators, who have accepted him as an inspired lawgiver, coming down from the mountain with the tables of stone in his hand, instead of seeing that he is only presenting shrewd deductions from his own observations in the theater when the masterpieces of the Greek drama were performed before his gaze.

In its size, in its material conditions, in its spectators, the Globe theater in London was very unlike the theater of Dionysos in Athens; and the picture-frame stage of our latter-day playhouses is very unlike the platform-stage of the Elizabethans; but none the less are the essential principles which guided Shakspeare in his greatest tragedies, when his ambition was aroused and when he was exerting all his powers, the same as those which governed Sophokles and which Aristotle declared,—as they are the same which Molière followed in his turn and which Ibsen was to obey in our own time. These essential principles are independent of the changes in the size and material conditions of the various theaters that have succeeded one another in the past twenty-five centuries; and it is because Aristotle was able to seize the most important of these principles more than two thousand years ago that he remains constantly up to date with no danger of ever falling out of date. This is the reason why his name is now constantly invoked by the more important reviewers of the contemporary drama, while the names of Johnson and Pope, of Boileau and Horace are allowed to languish in innocuous desuetude.

This modernness of Aristotle's dramatic theories is due mainly to his modesty in not assuming the attitude of the inspired lawgiver. He is never arrogant and dictatorial as are Horace and Pope, Boileau and Schlegel. He contents himself with pointing out the principles which seem to him to underlie the practises of the dramatic poets of accredited supremacy. He suggests that if Sophokles apparently obeys certain rules, why, then it might

be well if all those who may be ambitious to compose plays should also obey these rules. He conceives himself as giving counsel and as advising 'prentice playwrights how best they can model themselves on the masters. His conclusions are tentative, as becomes a man of science, conscious that the results of any inquiry are never final.

It need not surprise us that the uneasy Italian commentators of Aristotle did not see him in this light, and that they ascribed to him their own dictatorial and arrogant attitude. They knew Seneca better than they knew Sophokles; and they really relished the declamatory rhetoric of the Hispano-Roman more than the austere poetry and the masterly plotting of the great Greek. They knew Horace better than they knew Aristotle—Horace, who in all his life may never have seen a good play well acted and whose precepts are detached from practise, being borrowed second-hand from the Alexandrian critics of the Decadence. Perhaps it is not too much to say that the supersubtle Italians read Aristotle through the spectacles of Horace; and because Horace spoke as one having authority, they believed that Aristotle also was a promulgator of implacable decrees. And when they did not find in his text a code as complete or as rigid as they desired, in their intolerance they did not hesitate to draft new laws in the name of Aristotle. They sanctified the elaborate Classicist doctrine of the drama by sheltering it under his revered authority. It is no wonder that when the Romanticist revolt came, as it had to come, some of its leaders should have sneered at Aristotle, holding him responsible for the perverted theories put forth by his insatiable commentators. And it is also no wonder that Aristotle should have come into his own again after the "magniloquent silhouettes of Romanticist drama"—as Mr. Huneker has called them—shrivelled from the stage.

Aristotle's discussion of playmaking is incidental to his larger discussion of poetry; and it has come down to us incomplete and fragmentary. We cannot be assured that we have his own text. We are in doubt whether what we now possess is a portion of a careful treatise made ready for publication by Aristotle himself or whether it is only a collection of memorandums set down loosely to aid him in lecturing. There are even commentators who hold that our manuscripts are due not to Aristotle himself but to some ardent disciple who took notes to preserve as best he could the utterances of the master. The late Jules Lemaitre was of the second of these opinions, finding confirmation for it in the famous sentence about the tragic "purgation" of passion. "No doubt Aristotle jotted this down as a simple memento, for it is incomplete and badly constructed, containing a figure of speech both bizarre and ill-prepared; and it is very like those notes, intelligible only to ourselves, which we set down in a pocket-book with telegraphic or hieroglyphic brevity."

In the same criticism—an account of Corneille's vain efforts to reconcile his own practise with the precepts of Aristotle—Lemaitre dwells on the patent absurdity of supposing that all the precepts of Aristotle are final for all time and in all countries, since the Greek philosopher was making remarks only about the tragedies of his own day—"that is to say, about operas of a kind which were acted and sung two or three times a year at great festivals," and

of which Aristotle "might have seen or read a hundred at most, for they were not very numerous," probably outlining "his theories from his study of a score of prize-winning plays."

It is not to be wondered at that a few of Aristotle's remarks are applicable only to Greek tragedies—"operas of a kind"; what is wonderful is that so many of them are acceptable when applied to modern plays wholly unlike Greek tragedies, and that a critic as acute as M. Émile Faguet is not guilty of wilful paradox when he asserts that the more he studies the "Poetics" the more assured he feels that Aristotle "has given us rather the theory of French tragedy than that of Greek tragedy."

What are the principles of playmaking declared by Aristotle and as dominant today as they were in his own time? First of all, there is a clear recognition of the essential relation of the drama to the theater, with its declamation, its gestures, its spectacle and, above all, with its spectators whom the playwright has to interest, to arouse and to hold.

Secondly, there is an equally clear recognition of the supreme importance of the action, the story, the plot; "most important of all is the structure of the incidents; for a play is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life—of happiness and misery; and happiness and misery consist in action, the end of human life being a mode of action, not a quality. . . . Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character; character comes in as subsidiary to the action. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy, there may be without character. . . . The poet should be a maker of plots, rather than of verses; since he is a poet because he imitates and what he imitates are actions."

This is a hard saying for the defenders of the closet-drama, for it implies that merely as a play the "Two Orphans" is superior to the "Blot in the Scutcheon"; yet this would be denied by no competent dramatic critic. Jules Lemaitre dwelt on the accuracy of Aristotle's clear distinctions and pointed out that modern melodrama makes use of general types, often traditional and empty of veracity, and that plays with no atom of observation or of truth may move us on the stage by virtue of their situations alone, of their emotional appeal. "The object of the theater is to represent a man *acting*, and therefore to exhibit him to us, not as he is himself but as he bears himself in his relations with other men and under the influence of accidental circumstances. Now, if the playwright is also an observer and a psychologist, if he is capable of letting us pierce to the core of a character, of an original soul, in the brief moment when this soul is reacting against an external accident, evidently the result will be more valuable. Yet, although this merit is a welcome addition, it is not indispensable in the theater. In short, the drama interests us, not predominantly by the depicting of human nature, but primarily by situations, and only secondarily by the feelings of those therein involved."

Thirdly, a play must have unity of purpose. "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete and whole and of a certain magnitude. . . . A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. . . . A well-constructed plot, therefore,

must neither begin nor end at haphazard. . . . Of all plots and actions the episodic are worst; I call a plot *episodic* in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence."

Fourthly, the story of a play must be plausible. "It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity."

Fifthly, the playwright must never forget the playhouse and must always seek to foresee the effect to be produced when his play is actually performed. "In constructing the plot and working it out with the help of language the poet should place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the utmost vividness, as if he were a spectator of the action, he will

discover what is in keeping with it and will be most unlikely to overlook inconsistencies."

Sixthly, the tragic poet must avoid both the commonplace and the magniloquent: "The perfection of style is to be clear without being mean."

Here are a few of the most significant of Aristotle's suggestions to intending dramatists; they are simple enough, all of them, and obvious enough, not to say indisputable. Yet they are sufficient to justify the assertion of Professor Bywater that when Aristotle was engaged only in showing how to construct a play in accord with the material conditions of the Athenian theater, he succeeded also—"in formulating once for all the great first principles of dramatic art, the canons of dramatic logic, which even the most adventurous of modern dramatists can only at his peril forget or set at naught.

Brander Matthews

To be concluded.

SOME PHASES OF NINETEENTH CENTURY PAINTING

PART II

THE LOVERS OF TRADITION

By KENYON COX

THROUGHOUT the nineteenth century a few powerful and original artists maintained a reverence for the great traditions of the past and produced, each in his own way, an art that was truly classical. However they may appear to be mingled in the quarrels of the schools and the movements, they really stand apart from and superior to them. They are neither Pseudo-classics nor Romantics nor Naturalists. They are, first of all, great individual masters, and their connections are less with those around them or even with each other than with the great masters of all time. The first of them was born in 1758, the last of them died in 1904, and their lifetimes so overlap that their activities cover the whole century from the rigid tyranny of David at its beginning to the capricious lawlessness of its end. As against the absolutism of authority they are apostles of freedom; as against latter-day anarchy they are the upholders of eternal law.

PIERRE PAUL PRUDHON

Prudhon belongs, by the years of his production and by the character of his art, to both the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Ten years younger than David, he was twenty-six—an unknown student but an artist whose convictions were already formed, whose personal point of view was already established—when David made the first proclamation of his doctrines by the exhibition in 1785 of his "Oath of the Horatii"; and he never submitted himself to the influence of the great dictator. When he died in 1823, Géricault's "Raft of the Medusa" and Delacroix's "Bark of Dante" had both been painted and the Romantic revolt had begun. His art is so much akin to that of the eighteenth century that David slightly called him "the Boucher of his time"; so much akin to that of

the earlier Romantics that they were the first to hail him as the great master he was.

THE ELEMENTS OF PRUDHON'S ART

In his grace, his exquisite fancy, his delicate elegance; in his flights of baby Loves and his swinging Zephyrs, in his dainty sentiment and gentle moralizings, Prudhon is thoroughly of the eighteenth century, of the epoch of Louis XVI, when the exuberance of the Rococo is giving place to a kind of staid simplicity which prepared the way for that Empire style of decoration, of which he was so eminent a practitioner. He belongs to the Romantics by a deep personal feeling which underlies his graciousness—a passionate and unsatisfied yearning for the noble and the beautiful—and by the fact that he is a painter in love with light and air and the pearly gleam of flesh emerging from ambient shadow. He went to Rome a poor and ill-educated youth to study Raphael, for the time had not yet come when Raphael himself, the founder of the academic tradition, was thought insufficiently austere for profitable study. He remained to become a fanatic admirer of Leonardo and to make a deep study of Correggio, whose use of light and shade he better understood and more nearly equalled than has any other painter. Like every one else of his time he studied the antique also, and studied it profoundly, but with what different results! Where David could find only helmets and sword hilts or set patterns for the drawing of pectoral muscles and knee-caps, Prudhon, by a sympathetic intuition, found nature and life, infinite charm, exquisite refinement. Out of fragments here and there, for much of the ancient art that we know to-day was inaccessible to him, he formed a truer conception of the spirit of the Greeks as it showed itself in the-